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INFO RUEHB/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2004  
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RUALSFJ/COMUSJAPAN YOKOTA AB JA  
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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC//OSD/ISA/EAP//

C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000371

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2014

TAGS: PGOV PREL KS

SUBJECT: ROK PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES: HOW THEY DEFINE  
ENGAGEMENT WITH NORTH KOREA

REF: A. 06 SEOUL 3595

- 1B. SEOUL 0287
- 1C. 06 SEOUL 4014
- 1D. 06 SEOUL 3861
- 1E. 06 SEOUL 4036

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: With less than 11 months until South Korea's presidential election, the candidates continue to focus their public comments on building personal popularity rather than tackling policy issues. In various meetings with Embassy officers, the four frontrunners for the presidency provided some insight as to how they would engage (or not engage) with North Korea if they were elected president on December 19. The definition of engagement with North Korea is often associated with one's opinion on a North-South summit, support for the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) and Mt. Kumgang tours, and support for government sponsored fertilizer and food aid to the North. Among the leading candidates, GNP's Park Geun-hye is considered the most conservative in her policies toward North Korea. Uri Party's Chung Dong-young is at the opposite end, with GNP's Lee Myung-bak and Sohn Hak-kyu in between Park and Chung. END SUMMARY

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PARTY POLITICS  
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12. (SBU) Although as the campaigning intensifies this spring and summer each candidate will define their individual foreign policy stances, the Grand National Party (GNP) is more conservative and pro-U.S.-ROK alliance than the ruling Uri Party. GNP candidates are therefore likely to be more influenced by the U.S. position on North Korea than the Uri or other parties. Following the North's nuclear test on October 9, 2006, the GNP's official policy was that Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) and the Mt. Kumgang tourism project should be shut down until there was progress in the Six-Party Talks (ref A). With the impending breakup of the Uri Party (ref B), newly emerging parties will need to move quickly to identify their stance toward North Korea in an effort to distance themselves from their hugely unpopular former party and its policies.

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LEE MYUNG-BAK

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¶3. (C) Lee, former mayor of Seoul, is the current frontrunner for the GNP nomination. Lee said recently that everyone should support the notion of holding a North-South summit if it would help resolve the nuclear issues on the peninsula, but quickly followed up that statement by saying at this point a summit would not be particularly helpful in resolving the situation. In a meeting with the DCM in November (ref C), Lee said that he still supported inter-Korean projects like KIC and the Mt. Kumgang tourism project but did not approve of the direct cash payments involved in these efforts.

¶4. (C) According to Lee's lead foreign policy advisor, Yonsei professor Kim Woosang, Lee will support full participation in PSI and will, if asked, say that the North's missile and nuclear tests were a direct threat to South Korea, compared to President Roh's statement that the North's nuclear test was aimed at the United States and not South Korea. Still, Lee has been criticized by Park Geun-hye and others for tailoring his North Korea policy to suit the audience of the day.

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PARK GEUN-HYE  
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¶5. (C) Park Geun-hye is currently running in second place in the GNP party behind Lee. Park supports the continuation of the National Security Law because "North Korea continues to pose a serious threat to South Korea." She has also advocated for "flexibility" in North Korea strategy and stated that she thinks a firmer stance toward North Korea is appropriate if North Korea does not behave more responsibly.

Park met with Kim Jong-il in May 2002 after much hesitation. Since her mother was killed by North Koreans in 1974 at the order of Kim Jong-il's father, Kim Il-song, she did not want to meet Kim Jong-il, but said she overcame her hesitation for the good of her country. During the meeting with Kim in Pyongyang, Park agreed to work with the DPRK on building facilities for reunions of separated families and holding inter-Korean sporting matches. In an interview with a newspaper on January 11, 2007 Park said that the ROK was partly to blame for the North's October, 2006 nuclear test because they supplied aid without conditions. "The engagement policy has failed", Park said.

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SOHN HAK-KYU  
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¶6. (C) Trailing far behind Park and Lee in all polls, Sohn Hak-kyu has taken a more progressive approach toward North Korea than the other two GNP candidates. Sohn advocates a policy similar to that of Chung Dong-young, favoring an inter-Korean summit with the caveat that it should be in coordination with the U.S. and should further the goal of denuclearization on the Peninsula. Following the North's nuclear test, Sohn was quoted as saying that the ROK needed a "total reconsideration of North Korea policy." Sohn has since clarified that he was not calling for a change in the engagement policy of the ROK but rather a change in how the ROK works with other players to ensure peace on the peninsula.

¶7. (C) In a meeting with the Ambassador in November (ref d), Sohn outlined the three principles he thought the ROK should follow regarding North Korea: first, the ROK cannot accept a nuclear North Korea; second, if North Korea acts responsibly, they should be rewarded with aid, and if they act irresponsibly, there should be consequences; third, close cooperation with the U.S. and the international community should be paramount. Sohn also voiced his disagreement with former President Kim Dae-jung's public support for the Sunshine Policy immediately after the nuclear test suggesting that a strong rebuke for the North's provocation would have been more appropriate.

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CHUNG DONG-YOUNG  
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¶8. (C) Chung is currently the leading ruling party candidate but received only 3.3 percent support in a January 30 Donga Ilbo Newspaper poll. Although still affiliated with the Uri Party, Chung is expected to leave the party soon after the February 14 party convention. Unification Minister from 2003 to 2005, Chung is among the most recognized supporters of engagement policy. He supports the resumption of dialogue with North Korea as soon as possible and has said repeatedly that dialogue with the North should be for the purpose of resolving the nuclear issue. Regarding KIC and the Mt. Kumgang tourism project, Chung notes that the "fortresses" of walls and fences surrounding these two projects are a clear sign that the projects are not designed to foster interaction between the North and South as touted in the public (ref e). Chung, as the driving force behind KIC, would like to see the project further expanded.

¶9. (C) Chung supports an Inter-Korean summit and suggests it could even serve as a catalyst for progress in the Six-Party Talks. If and when Chung leaves the Uri Party, he will have more freedom to express different views on engagement with North Korea. As a former Minister of Unification under President Roh, the public is likely to associate his engagement policy with that of the current administration, regardless of attempts he may make to distance himself. Chung is also faulted for being naive toward the North during his tenure as unification minister.

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COMMENT  
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¶10. (C) Recent polls in the Korea media indicate that the Korean economy is likely to play the greater role in the December election. A survey by the Youido Institute in December 2006 indicated that 65 percent of the 1000 adults polled said economic growth was the most urgent task for the next administration. Lesser urgency was noted for inter-Korea issues (2.3 percent), stronger security (1.7 percent) and peace on the peninsula (1.3 percent). Even totaling these three North Korea categories, only 53 adults out of a thousand felt that North Korea issues were the most urgent for the next administration to consider.

¶11. (C) Putting the candidates into a broader perspective, Park is considered as the most conservative in her views of engagement with North Korea. Chung falls at the other end of the spectrum as the most progressive in his willingness to support North Korea. Lee is considered to be close to Park in the conservative GNP camp while Sohn falls somewhere between Lee and Chung as a more progressive GNP member. Despite this political alignment, a survey by the Maeil Newspaper in December showed that 46.6 percent of respondents thought that the personality characteristics of the candidates would be the most important factor in determining how respondents would vote in the election, followed by 29.6 percent for policies and 11.7 percent for ideological spectrum. This survey is further evidence that policy may take a backseat to personality in this election.

VERSHBOW